AN

ESSAY

ON

OPEN COMMUNION;

OR

THE FREEDOM OF THE LORD'S TABLE.

By RICHARD WRIGHT.

ONE IS YOUR MASTER EVEN CHRIST; AND ALL YE ARE BRETHREN. Matt. xxiii. 8.

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INTRODUCTION.

TOO long have the professors of the gospel disgraced themselves, and wronged the christian cause, by their bigotry and uncharitableness. It is hoped that liberality and christian affection are now daily increasing, and that they will continue to increase until they become universal. So long however as any narrow views, or illiberal plans exist in christian churches, it becomes a duty to do all we can to expand their love, and liberalize their proceedings.

The writer of the following Essay is a Baptist; but he glories in the name of christian more than in any other distinction, and thinks christians ought to receive one another to communion on the broad ground of their common faith in Christ, rather than on the ground of baptism, or what is peculiar to any particular denomination. His fervent wish is, that this small tract may promote the union and exertions of good men in the cause of truth and liberality.

12..1801

AN ESSAY &c.

CHAPTER I.

On the Lord's Supper.

SIMPLICITY is a grand characteristic of the christian religion: nor are its rites, or private institutes less simple than its leading facts and doctrines. Unlike judaism, it is not clogged with a multitude of ceremonies. Like a chaste matron, christianity appears the most lovely when divested of factitious decorations. The superstitious trappings, which erring men, blind to its native excellence, have drawn around it, have veiled its beauty, and exposed it to ridicule. If we would view christianity in its native simplicity and primitive glory, we must contemplate it, not as it appears in the creeds and formularies of modern churches, but as it was taught and practised by the apostles and first christians.

SECT. 1.—*Errors respecting the Lord's Supper.*

As instituted by Jesus Christ, and practised by the first christians, the Lord's supper had nothing mysterious in it: it consisted simply in christians eating and drinking together in remembrance of their beloved master. The first error respecting its nature and design was the converting of it into a mystery. Once admitted to be a mystical rite, its simplicity was lost, its original design forgotten, and a superstitious imagination left to indulge in the most fanciful speculations, the wildest reveries, respecting its nature and the benefits to be derived from partaking of it. Hence, in process of time, when superstition had established

its empire, and priestcraft was full grown, the bread and wine, by being consecrated, were supposed to be converted into the real body and blood of Christ; and a crucified man being transformed, in the imagination of a deluded people, into the God of the universe, those who partook of the Lord's supper were supposed to receive the real flesh and blood of Christ, yea of God himself. Thus were established transubstantiation, the mass, and all its abominations.

As the bodily eye, after being long immured in darkness, cannot at once bear the full light of day, nor discriminate objects with the greatest exactness; so the mental sight, long accustomed to error and superstition, cannot at once admit the full light of the gospel, nor accurately distinguish between truth and error; especially when long habits of thinking and acting in a particular train, have created strong prejudices. *Luther*, though he cast off the papal yoke, and exploded many of the errors of the Romish church, left the Lord's supper in mystery and darkness, by substituting consubstantiation in the place of transubstantiation. The Sacramentarians, though they receded further from the Romanists, on this subject, than the Lutherans, returned not to the simple view of it given in the New Testament; for a sacrament is an oath, but the Lord's supper is not an oath, nor does the partaking of it imply an oath.

Sect. 2.—*Remaining Effects of the foregoing Errors.*

When errors have long prevailed, and have much hold of the human mind, though they be detected and exploded, their influence and effects do not at once cease. Though protestant dissenters reject both transubstantiation and consubstantiation, and in general no longer view the Lord's supper as a proper sacrament, or oath, many of them regard it with that awe with which mysterious objects are usually contemplated: they feel respecting it as if it were something more than eating and drinking in remembrance

of their crucified master. Hence the idea of a formal preparation for the reception of it, and of the pre-requisites to be demanded of those who offer to come to the Lord's table. The feelings which false notions generated, which have out lived the notions which gave them birth, have helped to perpetuate unscriptural terms of communion. What but the influence of superstition can have led to the idea that though a man's faith in Christ cannot reasonably be denied, he ought not to be admitted to communion?

SECT. 3.—*The Design of the Lord's Supper.*

The words of Jesus, when he first introduced this institution, and those of the apostle Paul, when explaining it to the Corinthians, fully show that it is simply intended to preserve among christians a lively remembrance of their beloved master. At the same time, by continuing this practice, christians bear a continued testimony to the truth of the gospel, and to the great facts which are at the foundation of their religion. They recognize the existence of Jesus, the reality of his ministry, sufferings and death, and the gospel as the new covenant sealed with his blood. They refresh their memories, and edify their minds, with recollections the most affecting and interesting. Their uniting together in eating and drinking in remembrance of their common friend and Lord, is calculated to cherish their mutual affection, and to promote christian freedom among them.

SECT. 4.— *From the nature and design of the Lord's Supper, it follows that Communion ought to be open and free.*

Faith in Christ, or the general belief of the gospel, is the only thing necessary to enable a person to understand the nature and promote the design of the Lord's supper: consequently faith in Christ ought to be the only term of communion.

The Lord's supper has only to do with the leading facts of the gospel: it recognizes, it refers to nothing else: it has no reference, no allusion to baptism, or any other peculiarity of any party of christians; but simply brings to remembrance what they all believe: it follows, that no peculiarity of any party ought to be made a term of admission to it; but that all ought to have access on the ground of their common faith.

All who believe that Jesus is the Christ feel themselves interested in the facts recognized in the Lord's supper: they are capable of eating and drinking in remembrance of their beloved master. Who then shall dare to forbid them, by prohibiting their access to his table?

All who believe the leading facts of the gospel are capable of uniting in a testimony borne to their truth. Is it not desirable such testimony should be as general as possible? Can a person's not having been baptized, or his not admitting the peculiarities of any party of christians, disqualify him for bearing testimony to the death of Christ as the confirmation of the gospel? Certainly not. Then why should he be prevented doing it?

The table at this supper is the Lord's, the supper is of his appointing, and he has invited all his followers to be partakers of it. Who then has a right to stipulate on what terms they shall be admitted, to make fences round the table as if it were their own, and prohibit the approach of those who believe in Christ, merely because they differ from them in some points of religious faith and practice?

SECT. 5.-- *The opposers of open communion assume powers unauthorised by Jesus Christ.*

It has been taken for granted that Christ has given churches authority to decide who are proper persons to be admitted to the Lord's supper. Hence christian societies have assumed the prerogative of sitting in judgment on those who offer to unite with them, and

of deciding, either as a body acting in a corporate capacity, or by a committee of their appointing, or by their officer, or officers, who shall, and who shall not, come to the Lord's table. Either this power is derived from Christ, and authorised by the New Testament, or it is usurped and anti-christian. Merely its having been long assumed and exercised cannot legalize it. Let those who claim such power produce their warrant from the New Testament, or stand convicted of usurpation.

Christ has erected no tribunal at which those who profess his name are to be examined, and their fitness to come to his table decided on; though many churches have formed themselves into such a tribunal, and exercised the prerogatives of it. He left his table free, and gave all his followers a right to come to it. The existence of such a tribunal is inconsistent with christian liberty. Christ declared all his disciples to be brethren and fellow-servants: consequently one cannot have more authority over his table, to exclude or admit guests, than another. The assuming authority to decide who shall partake of the Lord's supper, is evidently an assumption of dominion in religious matters which Christ hath prohibited.

The apostle Paul, when writing to the Corinthians, respecting their improper conduct at the Lord's supper, does not direct them to examine one another, but each person to examine himself. He gives no prohibitory law to be enforced by the church against individuals; though that would have been a suitable time for him to have done it, had he deemed it proper. Though the freedom of the Lord's table had been abused, Paul did not abridge it.

The supposition that churches have a right to determine who shall be admitted to the Lord's supper, not only implies the exercise of dominion over the consciences of others; it must involve disunion, and lead to intolerance. If one man, or one church, make one opinion, or peculiarity, a term of communion, another may, with equal propriety, make a different opinion, or peculiarity, a term of communion; the

most trifling notion, or minute ceremony, may be made a term of communion; for the principle will be the same in every case: and the destruction of charity and union would be the consequence of such proceedings. If a church think it right to exclude a person from the Lord's table for nonconformity to their views, had they power over the Lord's table every where, they would exclude him every where, which would be making intolerance universal.

CHAPTER II.

That errors in judgment and practice, not inconsistent with integrity, ought to be no bar to communion.

ON many points all christians are agreed. Those things in which they agree are so plainly stated by the evangelists and apostles, that a man cannot seriously attend to the New Testament without perceiving them. On other points, of which baptism is one, christians are divided in their opinions. It is presumed that those things in which they all agree are of the greatest importance, and that those things only ought to be insisted on as essential articles of faith, and terms of communion.

SECT. 1.—*Errors in judgment are consistent with integrity.*

For the interests of holiness christians ought ever to be deeply concerned. No man ought to be countenanced in a breach of integrity; but it ought never to be concluded that a man is dishonest merely because his opinions seem to us erroneous. Various causes may operate to lead men into, and keep them in error, which imply no breach of their integrity. So long as men of integrity are capable of reasoning wrong, of misunderstanding the language of scripture,

and of making false conclusions, honest mistakes must be possible. Hardly two men can be found who think exactly alike on every point in religion. If it be not admitted that men may be honestly mistaken, the honesty of all men will be impeached; for where is the man who is totally free from error? If it be granted that men may err without any breach of integrity, who will undertake to say how far an erroneous judgment may extend? Who can define the limits of human fallibility before it sinks into vice, or say how far honesty and error may walk together?

SECT. 2.—*Errors in judgment will sometimes produce mistakes in religious practice.*

Those errors in judgment which relate not merely to speculative subjects, will of course produce errors in practice. An honest man will do what he thinks right; he cannot consistently with integrity act contrary to his judgment. If a man ought not to be excluded from communion for his errors in judgment, he ought not to be excluded for proceeding in religion according to that erroneous judgment. To exclude him merely on the latter account would be to exclude him for his uprightness. To act contrary to his apprehensions of duty, would be to violate the dictates of his conscience; to prove himself a dishonest man.

SECT. 3.—*Mistakes about baptism are compatible with integrity.*

Though christians of all parties believe, they reason differently, and make different conclusions from what they read concerning baptism in the New Testament: hence a diversity in opinion and practice naturally follows. That mistakes exist on this subject cannot be denied; but as it must be admitted that honest men are capable of reasoning wrong on scripture facts and declarations, of misconceiving the extent of their meaning and application, such mistakes may be perfectly consistent with godly honesty. Among those

whose faith in Christ cannot be reasonably questioned, and whose conduct has done high honour to the christian cause, there have been, and still are, baptists, antibaptists, and pedobaptists. For any one of these parties to question the integrity of the other two would be extremely arrogant. If their integrity on other subjects is not thought questionable, why should it be questioned on the subject of baptism? It would be absurd to suppose them honest in all other matters and dishonest in that particular. The different parties think themselves right; the differences between them are equal; and the baptist has no more right to question the integrity of the antibaptist, or the pedobaptist, than these latter have to question his integrity. The differences which exist on the subject of baptism may be accounted for without impeaching the integrity of any party. We are in different circumstances to what the first christians were; they were proselytes from judaism and heathenism; we are born and grow up on christian ground. The gospel history descends not far enough to inform us what was the mode of proceeding with respect to baptism, as to those who were born of christian parents. The words of the commission which Jesus gave his apostles, and other scripture expressions, are differently construed by men of learning and piety, and are capable of being differently interpreted without any breach of integrity. Hence the subject is left to be decided by the expositions of fallible men, and their inferences.

SECT. 4.—*Christians ought not to be excluded from the Lord's supper for their mistakes.*

If men are to be excluded from communion for mistakes, which are not inconsistent with integrity, there ought to be some infallible umpire to decide who are the mistaken persons. If it be contended that the scriptures are such an umpire; it is replied, that if that be granted, still the sense of scripture is collected, and applied to particular cases, by fallible men; nor do the scriptures render one set of men

more infallible in their judgment than another. Without we could be infallibly certain that those who differ from us are mistaken, and to such infallibility we dare not pretend; while we exclude them from communion, for what we think their mistakes, we may possibly exclude them for what are no mistakes at all. How far mistakes in religion are avoidable, and involve culpability, God only knows: but unless we could be sure their mistakes are really criminal, we may exclude them for what is no real fault. Those who differ from us are not at all accountable to us for their opinions and religious practices; of course we can have no authority to exclude them from the Lord's table, on account of what we may think erroneous, either in their judgment or practice. If any mistake which consists with integrity, excludes a person from communion, then every mistake may expose to such exclusion; for who is to decide what mistakes are, and what are not compatible with christian communion? We have often detected errors in ourselves, both in judgment and practice, and we may do so again: ought we not then to exercise candour and affection towards those who seem to us to be in error? Can we suppose our heavenly father will reject any man of integrity and piety, merely on account of his honest mistakes? How then dare we reject such! Are we sure we have not greater defects than the errors we object to in those who differ from us? How then can we exclude them from privileges to which we think we have a right notwithstanding such defects?

CHAPTER III.

That baptism ought not to be made a term of communion in the present day.

Those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, and show a disposition to obey the gospel, according to their own views of it, ought not to be deterred from

coming to the Lord's table. What can we reasonably require of men but to profess what they think true, and to do what they think most right? Were others to assent to our opinions, without being convinced of their truth, and to practise what we recommend, without seeing it to be right, they would be guilty of hypocrisy, and incur the displeasure of God. Ought we to desire others to proceed in religious matters according to our judgment, or their own, to what we believe to be the dictates of scripture, or what themselves believe to be such? Shall we, who are as fallible as those who differ from us, make a conformity with our judgment, on the subject of baptism, a term of communion, and exclude those who honestly differ from us? We ought to answer these questions before we insist on baptism as a term of communion. To which I add the following considerations.

SECT. 1.—*Baptism is not necessary to qualify a person to receive the Lord's supper aright.*

Baptism is not necessary to qualify a man to understand the Lord's supper: he may believe that Jesus is the Christ, that he died, and that his death is the seal of the new covenant, without being baptized in any form. If he be in an error respecting baptism, that error destroys not his memory; he is not the less capable of remembering the Lord Jesus at his table. The subjects brought into view there have no inseparable connexion with, nor necessary dependance on baptism. The baptist, the antibaptist, and the pedobaptist, may all equally discern the Lord's body; and consequently be worthy partakers. Wrong views of baptism will not necessarily prevent a christian's having a lively and grateful remembrance of the generous love of his crucified master.

SECT. 2.—*To exclude persons from the Lord's supper, because they are not baptists, is to prevent their obedience to Christ, and hinder their edification.*

A compliance with the request of the great master of christians, *Do this in remembrance of me,* is an act of obedience to him, an act which all who believe on his name are capable of performing. To prevent their doing it is to interrupt them in the path of obedience. If they see not the propriety of obeying one command, at least according to our views of it, shall we forbid their obeying another command which they view in the same light as ourselves? When in obedience to the direction of their Lord, they are coming to his table, shall we obtrude ourselves in their way, and forbid their approach? Because they do not embrace every thing we think a privilege, and deem edifying, shall we take upon us to exclude them from privileges they would gladly embrace, and means of edification they would cheerfully adopt? Is this the way to do them good, or to increase and edify our churches? Who gave us authority to forbid obedience to a command of Christ, in any case, or to withhold the privileges of the Lord's house from any who wish to enjoy them?

SECT. 3.—*The views Baptists have of those who differ from them, respecting baptism, should induce them to admit them to communion.*

That honest and conscientious men, may and do differ, on the subject of baptism, has been shewn already; and ought we to exclude honest and conscientious christians from the Lord's table, merely because we think them mistaken on that subject? We admit the reality of their faith, and the general correctness of their conduct: how then can we justify ourselves in excluding those we believe to be good men and real christians from the Lord's supper. Do we suppose their mistakes respecting baptism will

exclude them from the kingdom of God hereafter? I apprehend we do not: and shall we shut those out of our churches now, who we believe will be admitted to the society of the blessed in the life to come? While we revere the christian attainments, are edified by the pious conversation, and profited by the labours of those, who are not baptists, shall we refuse to eat and drink with them at the table of our common lord? Shall we say to them, "Though we profess to be only "brethren and fellow servants among the disciples of "Christ, and pretend to no dominion over the faith "and consciences of others, yet because you do not "view baptism as we do, and will not attend to it "in the way we think right, though we do not deny "the reality of your faith, nor the uprightness of "your conduct, we will not sit down with you at the "Lord's table, nor permit you to unite with us in "testifying your regard to the memory of your crucified master?" If we exclude them, we in effect say all this to them.

SECT. 4.—*Baptists do not exclude persons from communion for greater mistakes than those which relate to baptism.*

Some mistakes among christians relate to the object of worship, to the character of God, to the ground of a sinner's hope, and to the final destination of men. These are certainly of much greater consequence than any mistakes which exist respecting baptism. Towards persons whom they think mistaken in the above great points, many of our baptist brethren act with true and commendable liberality: they admit them to communion, and to all the privileges of their churches. While they do this is there not a manifest inconsistency in their excluding those who differ from them merely respecting baptism? Why not extend their liberality in that particular, and become the consistent patrons of christian charity? Why should their conduct say to others, "You may differ from us respecting the "object of worship; you may assert what we think

" erroneous respecting the character of God, so as, in
" our view, to veil its infinite loveliness; you may err
" respecting the ground of the sinner's hope, by sub-
" stituting something else in the place of the free
" mercy and favour of God; you may maintain notions,
" which we think horrid, respecting the final desti-
" nation of men; our churches are open to receive
" you, we can partake with you at the Lord's supper;
" but if you err on the subject of baptism, we cannot
" admit you to communion; the way to the Lord's
" table is closed against you!"

SECT. 5.—*The making baptism a term of communion is inconsistent with christian liberty.*

The question respecting baptism as a term of communion calls forth the previous question,—has one christian a right to judge for another, and decide how he ought to act in matters of faith and conscience? If individuals have not this right, churches cannot possess it; for a church has no more authority over faith and conscience than an individual christian. If we have no right to judge for others, we can have no right to make our judgment a rule of action to them. If we have no right to make our judgment a rule of action to others, we have no right to exclude them from communion for not conforming to our judgment: consequently we can have no right to make a conformity to our views of baptism a term of communion, and the doing it is contrary to christian liberty.

As christians have no master but Christ, are all brethren, and have an equal right to judge and act for themselves in all religious matters, in the affair of baptism as much as in any other, the making a conformity to our views of baptism a term of communion is an encroachment on the liberty of others, and their right of private judgment. The baptist can have no more right to make a conformity to his views a term of communion than the antibaptist, or the pedobap-

tist: he can have no more right to exclude them than they have to exclude him. The principles of christian liberty require that communion should be open and free.

SECT. 6.—*Objections answered.*

I will anticipate some of the objections my baptist brethren may make to my views and reasonings.

OBJECT. 1.—*We do not pretend to judge for others, or dictate how they shall act respecting baptism.*

ANS. Though you profess not to do this, you do it in effect, as you exclude them from the Lord's table for not acting according to your judgment.

OBJECT. 2.—*We have no authority to admit unbaptized persons to the Lord's supper.*

ANS. This objection takes for granted what cannot be admitted, i. e. that you have authority to sit in judgment upon your brethren, and decide who are proper persons to come to the Lord's-table; Jesus Christ hath given you no such power, You are not masters, but only guests at his table, and have no authority to decide who shall partake of his supper.

OBJECT. 3.—*None but baptised persons partook of the Lord's supper in the apostolic age.*

ANS. This cannot be fully proved. It cannot be proved that all to whom Jesus himself administered the supper had been baptized. Those who were previously John's disciples no doubt had: respecting the others we have no proof; for Jesus baptized not but his disciples. The admission, that all the first christians were baptized, is not sufficient ground for making baptism a term of communion in the present day; for the opponents of the baptists will generally grant

that they were, but deny the conclusion which the baptists draw, from this admission, in favour of close communion. It is in reference to a period posterior to the apostolic age, and as applying to the offspring of christians, that baptism becomes a controversial subject: and there is no infallible umpire to decide: therefore the foregoing objection is irrelevant.

OBJECT. 4. *The admission of unbaptized persons to the Lord's supper implies a dereliction of baptism.*

ANS. By no means. We still maintain our own opinion and act upon it, and continue at full liberty to do all we can to convince others of the propriety of our views and conduct.

OBJECT. 5. *By adopting open communion we should countenance others in the neglect of a christian duty.*

ANS. Not at all. You would express no countenance of their views of baptism; you would still be at liberty to instruct them, on that and every other subject, and would be more likely to do it with success; as your liberality would excite their attention, and promote your intercourse with them. On the contrary by excluding them from communion with you, you prevent their performing what they believe a duty, uniting with you at the Lord's supper, and deprive yourselves of that union with them which might be productive of mutual good.

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A

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TO THE

REV. NEAL DOUGLAS,

CONTAINING

GENERAL REMARKS ON HIS PAMPHLET,

ENTITLED

MESSIAH'S PROPER DEITY.

BY R. WRIGHT.

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